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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2013. Pp. 320. Cloth \$28.50, paper \$18.00.

In *The Bet* Sabin interweaves the professional careers of two prominent academics into the larger story of the debate over U.S. environmental policy from the 1970's to the present. Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*, became a prophet of the dangers of overpopulation. He believed that most of the world's environmental and social problems were connected to a human population that was rapidly growing beyond the planet's carrying capacity. Furthermore, he predicted that as the population increases it would deplete essential resources and create a nightmarish future of environmental and social disasters. Julian Simon argued both in public and in his book *The Ultimate Resource* that an increase in human population would lead not to disaster but to new opportunities. Simon countered Ehrlich's pessimism with an optimistic belief that innovation and human capital could overcome any potential shortages in essential resources. Simon and Ehrlich placed a bet on whether the price of five metals would increase or decrease between 1980 and 1990. Sabin argues that this bet, and its participants, became a stand-in for our ongoing national debate on the environmental impact that humans have on the planet and the consequences of that impact.

Sabin uses these two men, high profile advocates for opposing worldviews, to chart the continually shifting debate over environmental issues and how that debate has become highly polarized over time. The personal and professional feud between Ehrlich and Simon represents the degree to which the environment went from being a bipartisan cause in the early 1970's to a rancorous partisan feud, beginning in the 1980's and continuing into the present. Ultimately, Sabin argues that the increasingly bitter dispute between these two academics illustrates how extreme partisanship has tainted the national debate over environmental policy and we must not cling to either Ehrlich's extreme pessimism or Simon's extreme optimism.

The real strength of Sabin's book is his ability to turn the history of environmentalism into a dual biography of sorts that uses a pair of fascinating characters to help the reader understand the larger debate. In this context, Presidents Carter and Reagan's policies are seen to be the reactions to shifting beliefs about the environment and humanity's future within American society. Ehrlich and Simon are nuanced individuals but their participation in this debate strips them of nuance in the eyes of the public. Thus, we find their stories engaging even as we see others try to turn them into extremist caricatures in a struggle where there can be no middle ground. Sabin argues that a middle ground is what we need in our environmental debate even as he shows us how



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hard it has been to maintain the integrity of that middle ground over the past several decades.

Sabin tells an engaging story that reads more like a novel than history. It is an interesting narrative with a significant moral that has the added benefit of being very well told. By using a pair of intriguing characters he explains how saving the planet ceased to be something we could all agree upon.

Bridger Bishop
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2012. Pp. 576 pages. Hardcover \$50.00, paper \$24.95.

In 1995, William Cronon wrote, “the time has come to rethink wilderness,” providing a call to arms for budding environmentalists to re-examine the ways that they thought about the accepted myth of the pristine, untouched wilderness. Since then, Cronon’s Weyerhaeuser series on environmental history has offered up books that examine the relationship between humanity and nature, both culturally and politically, and this trend continues with James Morton Turner’s *The Promise of Wilderness*. As Cronon himself writes in the foreword to *The Promise of Wilderness*, an “accidental trilogy” has formed about this trouble with wilderness, where three authors explore the ways in which preserving wilderness has created a new kind of environmental politics. Much like Paul Sutter’s *Driven Wild* and Mark Harvey’s *Wilderness Forever*, Turner examines the ways in which wilderness, and the politics of maintaining it,

has affected the United States. Throughout the book, Turner contends that wilderness is not just “a place or an idea; it is also a political process.” By framing his book around the 1964 Wilderness Act, and the political machinations that came after it, Turner is able to show the ways in which American politics were influenced by the work of environmentalists trying to improve America’s putatively “wild” spaces.

Turner organizes his book into three main chronological sections, which are then broken down by political issue, giving each chapter the detail and attention that it deserves. Turner describes the ways in which environmentalists and politicians worked together to achieve common goals to help America’s public lands in the years after the Wilderness Act. By 1979, however, the implementation of the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II saw a stark line drawn between politicians and environmentalists, who were turning more radical in their efforts to enact conservationist legislation. In the final section, Turner examines the ways in which modern science became more important in the efforts to reform environmental policy in America, as a battle waged between the interests of the two major political parties for control of the country.

By organizing the book in this way, Turner is able keep the reader engaged as time progresses, as well as making sure each issue is examined methodically, showing all sides of a particular area of interest. *The Promise of Wilderness* is a thoroughly political history, using wilderness as the lens through which to look at the progression of environmentalist efforts in American politics. Not only does



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Turner examine the politics involved in preserving the wilderness of America, but he examines political theory of the time as well as examining the ways in which the political context of the era might have influenced environmental legislation.

The most important part of Turner's work, however, is not his political analysis or the way he can turn a phrase, but the amazing depth of the research that he put into this book. Not only does Turner skillfully synthesize politics and theory for each issue that a chapter might address, but also his analysis of previous research on the topic is a valuable part of each section. This allows any reader, whether academic or not, to find a place to read more should they be interested in a particular issue that Turner is describing. This book, while most likely meant for academics interested in environmental studies, is an excellent choice for any reader who wishes to know more about the politics of environmental history.

Kelly Finnerty

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013. 368 pages. Hardcover \$30.00, paper \$17.00.

Earth Day 1970 is credited with helping to spark the environmental decade of the 1970s but to this point no historian has attempted to tell its story because most historians have labeled it as symbolic. Adam Rome provides the first fully in-depth account of the origins, actions, and legacy of the first Earth Day, which took place on April 22, 1970. In great

detail Rome describes the prehistory of the environmental movement and the effects of Earth Day, while simultaneously discussing the individual organizers, participants, and speakers that shaped it. Rome organizes his narrative around the different kinds of actors involved in the events of Earth Day followed by a section discussing the legacies of Earth Day, calling it "the making of the first green generation" (xi).

Rome gives credit to Earth Day for connecting the varied causes of "pollution, sprawl, nuclear fallout, pesticide use, wilderness preservation, waste disposal, and population growth together as one environmental crisis" (10). Earth Day also united scientists, conservationists, women, and young people to create an environmental bloc. He next moves on to tell the individual stories of the organizers of Earth Day, including Senator Gaylord Nelson, Representative Pete McCloskey, their young staff, and grassroots organizers. He emphasizes the differences in both scale and focus of Earth Day events, from a whole week in Philadelphia to a small educational gathering in Kansas to a march from Sacramento to Los Angeles traveling down the agribusiness heartland of the California Central Valley. He also shows the variety of speakers including preachers, politicians, scientists, and environmental advocates, many of whom had never spoken publicly about the environment. Finally he concludes with a discussion of the "new eco-infrastructure" constructed by the events of Earth Day (209). This included the increase in grass-roots organizations, lobbying



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organizations, environmental reporters, the eco-book industry, environmental studies programs, and ecology centers.

According to Rome, the reason for Earth Day's success was due to its dual experience as both an "educational experience and political demonstration" that allowed it to have both long-term and short-term impacts (273). Senator Nelson, the originator of the idea of an "environmental teach-in," did not provide a centralized agenda, nor did he micromanage (274). The lack of a centralized agenda allowed for both variety and a feeling of ownership among local volunteers and organizers. Earth Day contained a feeling of something new. Rome gathers his resources from over 120 interviews with organizers and participants at varying levels of Earth Day, as well as from archival sources.

He is successful in his attempts to show the wide variety of manifestations of the spirit of Earth Day and how each individual event contained the distinct character of its locale and organizers. He is particularly successful when he compares Earth Day 1970 to Earth Day 1990, demonstrating the differences between corporate environmentalism that had taken hold of the 1990 event and the spirit of self-discovery fostered in 1970. Rome could refine his arguments by offering conclusions at the end of his chapters. Perhaps like the organizers of the first Earth Day he wishes to leave the interpretation of the events up to the reader. *The Genius of Earth Day* provides a quality narrative discussing a watershed moment in the

environmental movement. Rome should succeed in finding a popular audience for a popular movement.

Anthony Graham
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Cindy Ott, *Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon*. Seattle: University Washington Press. 2012. 336 pages. Hardcover \$50.00, paper \$24.95.

Cindy Ott, professor of American Studies at Saint Louis University, has successfully synthesized several centuries of American cultural history in her book *Pumpkin: The Curious History of An American Icon*. The idea for this unique topic came to Ott when helping sell pumpkins at a friend's pumpkin stand in suburban Maryland. From this experience with the pumpkin, Ott developed a seven chapter historical narrative that begins with the pumpkin's mythical appearance at the first Thanksgiving in 1621 and traces the fruit's evolution from sustenance food to cultural icon in the twenty-first century. In chapters such as "The Times Wherein Old Pompion Was A Saint," "Jack-O-Lantern Smiles," and "Putting up A Pig Sty to Put In A Pumpkin Patch," Ott clearly and interestingly demonstrates that, "romance for an era of premarket agriculture is inextricably linked to the economic realities of modern capitalism and American Farming" (7). Center stage of this thesis is the pumpkin.

Ott begins with how the pumpkin initially was cultivated for subsistence. As cultural factors evolved the pumpkin and other



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foods became symbols of class identification because, “Many people thought of melons and pumpkins as markers not only of social classes but also of cultural differences between Europeans and Americans” (40). By highlighting many writers such as Nathaniel Ward, Samuel Peters, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Cotton Mather, Ott marshals an impressive collection of surreptitious historical references to the pumpkin. Utilizing such references she constructs the framework of a larger narrative in which she develops the pumpkin’s ascent to the cultural icon it has become in modern times.

Ott’s narrative shows how, as the U.S. expanded, the pumpkin became less relevant to farmers. Cash crops such as corn and wheat became the most profitable uses for agriculture. However, under the surface of the growing agri-economy, pumpkins were becoming part of a romantic nostalgia for a bygone era of rustic farm life. Ott observes, “The pumpkin embodied the simple things in life found in the classic American dream, such as the rewards of hard work in the land of opportunity” (124).

While this romanticism for the past was taking root, the pumpkin’s association with Halloween and Thanksgiving was growing and propelling a resurgence of the pumpkin not as a staple food but as a cultural symbol of the two holidays. Farmers and agri-industries captured this reemergence by highlighting the pumpkin pie as a necessity of an authentic Thanksgiving dinner. At the same time jack-o-lanterns became the emblem of the Halloween season.

Pumpkin is a great read for the historian, while the parent preparing for a trip to the pumpkin patch will also find value in Ott’s prose and narrative. The largest flaw in

the book is its lack of comparisons to other cultural food icons such as pecan pie or Easter eggs. This lack of identification is forgivable, however, given the challenge of writing such a narrative. Ott’s book should be recognized as unique and an important addition to cultural history.

John Grygo
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2012. 520 pages. Hardcover \$50.00, paper \$24.95.

“[T]o see the past with fresh eyes, and in the process, recover the forgotten and overlooked ground on which so much history has unfolded.” With this fresh and unique approach to the environmental history textbook, Mark Fiege illustrates a version of American history through the axiomatic lens of nature. Highlighting the role of the environment in America’s major historical events, Fiege expressly engages in a different and accessible type of environmental textbook. Part of the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series, William Cronon introduces Fiege’s volume as one of the most important works in the history of the field in his foreword (ix). Creatively conceived, Fiege’s textbook emphasizes the significance of the environment and nature at every turn in America’s past.

Not intended to be a complete survey, Fiege focuses instead on each story’s depth as he revisits iconic phenomena in America’s past within each chapter, including monuments and memorials (e.g. Lincoln Memorial), New England’s Salem Witch trials, the founding



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fathers and their Declaration of American Independence, rise of cotton and slavery in the agriculturally based Southern economy, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, the first U.S. transcontinental railroad, the atomic bomb, desegregation and *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the 1970s oil crisis. Throughout each, Fiege attempts to explicate the preeminent role of nature and environment: “within every famous icon, turning point, movement, or moment is a story of people struggling with the earthy, organic substances that are integral to the human predicament” (8).

Fiege argues histories of humans are influenced--if not dominated--by nature and the environment. In *Republic of Nature*, Fiege applies his argument to the history of non-Native Americans beginning with the seventeenth century’s colonial settlements. In the first of nine different cases, Fiege attempts to show that the Salem witch trials and accusations of witchcraft manifested, in large part, from colonists’ failure to understand the environment of North America.

Fiege’s broad and laborious engagement with a wide range of source material is evident throughout the work. Within his notes, he includes a historiographical guide of major scholarship upon which his textbook proceeds including the works and theoretical assessments of Donald Worster, Richard White, Linda Nash, and William Cronon, among other noted environmental historians. Primary sources include personal accounts, speeches and sermons, literary references, government documents, science and medical research, and much more. Given the varied, generous body of sources presented, his is an achievement of discovery for environmental

stories in unconventional and unexpected places. At its core, Fiege’s book is an environmental history.

Fiege’s *Republic of Nature* attempts to change the way students of history view the environment’s role in the American past. In his effort to help them “realize that American history, in every way imaginable—from mountains to monuments—is the story of a nation and its nature,” Fiege has undoubtedly succeeded (9).

Leslie Lewis

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Ted Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound: The Ecological History of Greater New York*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2014. 544 pages. Hardcover \$32.00, paper \$18.00.

In *Gotham Unbound* historian Ted Steinberg examines the relationship between New Yorkers and New York’s natural world: land, water, animals, and plants. Steinberg studies Greater New York from 1609 to 2012 and focuses on evolving relationships between individuals and the environment. Steinberg concentrates on the change in New York Harbor’s aquatic environment over time and further organizes the narrative by major economic and social changes in the city. Ultimately, geography did not determine the success or failure of New York City, but rather nature places limits on people, confining population and economic growth, and the leaders of the city dictated the future, not nature (xviii). Steinberg describes New York City as “one of the most creative acts of vandalism ever perpetrated on a natural landscape” (xxii).



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Illustrating the intersections of environmental, social, and political change in New York City, Steinberg shows readers that the environmental history is not a tale of declension, but one that rises and falls, constricted by the limits of New York City's biome. However, the majority of the book is a narrative of environmental decline. In Part 1, Steinberg argues that the economy shaped the city and the expansion of commerce led to ecological change. In Part 2, Steinberg emphasizes the 1811 grid plan that altered the environment while also laying the groundwork for "high-density" living. In Part 3, he establishes that New Yorkers started to realize the geographic limits of the city and turned to unusual solutions for spatial problems. For example, the Fresh Kills Landfill perfectly illustrates his argument that many people believed that nature served the purpose of man through most of the twentieth century (242). Steinberg begins to complicate the story of environmental decline in Parts 3 and 4 by examining the growth of non-native plant and animal species (280). In Part 4, he concludes with a stark look at the future of Gotham's limited potential for expansion, the popularity of environmentalism, and the risk of natural disasters for cities by the sea.

Tracing the ecological history of New York, Steinberg follows the shift from an estuary of high natural density to a city of high human density over the course of 400 years, tracing the detrimental ecological impacts along the way. He is more interested in larger environmental change so he focuses on the aquatic environment of New York Harbor. This concentration on water often expanded to a discussion of land and animals but largely

ignored air quality and pollution. In addition he is much more concerned with major political and social change in the city and as a result women, racial and ethnic minorities, and working class individuals play a minute role in the narrative.

Steinberg often paints New York City as a unique place. However, New York City is one of 22 large cities situated on an estuary. *Gotham Unbound* serves as a case study for these cities, such as Seattle and London, and future studies will expand on Steinberg's arguments, perhaps disputing his claims that New York City has an exceptional environment. Steinberg provides a compelling study of both an estuary city and a city close to the waterline, an issue of great concern for many people, cities, and governments as global water levels rise.

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